

Redeemed: The difference

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Category: Halo

Genre: Adventure

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2006-10-05 02:25:15

Updated: 2006-11-13 05:15:44

Packaged: 2016-04-27 02:16:07

Rating: M

Chapters: 3

Words: 5,095

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: The prequel to An ODST's Life, this tells the story of how Lipton came to be a member of the elite ODST corps and the grueling training required to be the best of the best.

1. CT MASADA

Sirens blared in the background as Lipton dove for cover in the Shooting House. A line of holes chased him down the hall as the 'terrorist' fired blindly through the plywood walls. He checked his chrono and swore.

"2:10."

The second team hadn't entered the building yet and they were five minutes behind schedule. That meant he was the only one in a position to disarm the bomb. Too bad he had skipped the bomb-diffuse training session because of a high-ankle sprain. He had the worst luck.

A sustained burst silenced the 'terrorist' and bought him some breathing room. He tried his radio again, but to no avail. The radio on the other end was dead. _Come on guys. Don't leave me hanging._

The door ahead of Lipton burst open and a towering figure in active-camo armor landed by his side. Through the smoke Lipton read the insignia on his shoulder. First Sergeant. _It's got to be Jacobson._

"Good to see you. We've got two to stop this thing. There are at least three inside. Maybe more."

"Roger that." The voice wasn't Jacobson's. In fact, the voice sounded nothing like any of the CTF's voices. Lipton let it slide and concentrated on the doorways leading in. "I'll get the door on the left. You cover right."

Right. Good luck on that. They've got that door mined. Lipton considered warning him but decided better of it. At the least this arrogant newcomer could draw fire before getting wasted by their instructors.

"Three seconds to prep." Lipton pressed his back up against the adjacent wall and counted silently. He had barely counted to three when the other soldier shot through the door with inhuman speed. Lipton's training kicked in and he followed through a split-second later, scanning for targets.

The six 'terrorists' all were sitting down where they had been hit, each one bearing a welt in the forehead from a hit. The other soldier was already past them and racing to the bomb. Not a single scratch showed on his armor. Lipton shook his head in wonder and chased after him. They reached the bomb with less than a minute remaining. Together they rewired the arming mechanism and sliced the trigger. The bomb stopped ticking with four seconds left.

The C.O.P. (Command Observational Post) ended the scenario and set the lights back on. Looking out a window, Lipton got a glimpse of the second team. They stood up sheepishly from their position under guard by a squad of heavily armed instructors. Bullet casings littered the area around them, indicating an intense fight.

Lipton's radio barked in his ear as his Operational Commander announced the results.

"Bomb defused. Good job Lipton. Report to the ONI-OB immediately. Second squad return to barracks for debriefing. Out."

Lipton groaned inwardly. _ONI? What did I do this time?_ He turned to the other soldier and pulled his helmet off. "Thanks for the help. I couldn't have done it without you."

The soldier nodded curtly and offered a hand. "You're welcome. I am Spartan 117."

Lipton frowned and took the hand warily. "Is that a call-sign or something? Or is it your unit?"

"Both, sort of. I came over to provide that 'unidentified variable' for you guys. You handled the situation well."

"Thanks. I think." Lipton cracked his knuckles and picked up his AR. "Well, I've got to go. I hope I'll see you soon."

"I doubt you will."

As Lipton stepped out of the room a chill ran down his spine. He tried to shake it off, but decided it was from the adrenaline rush, so he let it go. No sense fighting your own body.

The absence of light in the room was the first thing that Lipton noticed. As the door slid shut behind him all light left, leaving him in a pitch-black room. From experience he knew that there was a two-way mirror on the opposite wall and that whoever was there could see him perfectly.

A light flicked on and Lipton saw what he least expected. Admiral

Hood and two ONI colonels sat at a table in the middle of the room. Three files that Lipton recognized as his personnel files were on the table, open and well-read. _Great._

Admiral Hood motioned to a seat and waved off the salute. Lipton responded with the customary speed. The meeting did not bode well. Two ONIs and an Admiral meant trouble. He was in for it.

The officer to Hood's right looked briefly at a page of Lipton's file that he didn't recognize and cleared his throat.

"Warrant Officer George Lipton, is it?" Lipton knew better than to answer. "It says here that you have a long record with your commanding officers. _Gross insubordination in exercises_, _Dereliction of duty_, _Unauthorized leave_, the list is quite long. According to this, you cause more trouble than a dozen freshmen on break."

Lipton swallowed hard and struggled to ignore the anticipation clawing at his ice-cold gut. This would not be a good day for him.

The officer continued unperturbed. "A record like yours would ground most men with court-martial; but we do not want that." He leaned forward and held out a sheet for Lipton. Lipton grabbed the paper and examined it quickly. There were two options written on it. Orbital Drop Shock Trooper, or death penalty for treason. He was shocked.

"Being the merciful commander that he is, Admiral Hood is giving you options. Choose carefully."

Lipton dropped the paper and faced the officer. "What crap is this, sir? Since when was saving fellow soldiers considered treason?"

"You will do as you're told, Lipton!" The other ONI creep rose to his feet and pounded a heavy fist into the table. "We could execute you for any number of your acts! Be thankful that we are giving you another way out."

Admiral Hood held up a hand to halt the ONI officer. Rising to his feet, the Admiral offered a hand to Lipton. "Son, I know a good soldier when I see one. You are good, but not as good as you think. You need to be conditioned to perform as a team-player. That's what we are about.

"Besides, I know the details of your pals prank. I considered shipping you off to MP duty, but my daughter intervened before I could sign the order. You're lucky that I see the same thing she sees in you. Otherwise you would be cleaning latrines for the rest of your life.

"I'll give you five hours to pack up your things before you are shipped out to Earth for training."

Earth! Lipton could hardly believe it. Here he had been expecting a hammer and anvil, and instead got a new job and a trip to the Sol system, the very center of humanity. So much for ONI and their crusade against humankind.

Lipton shook the Admiral's hand and stood. As the door closed behind him, Lipton called out. "Thank you sir. I'll make her proud."

Life was about to become much more interesting.

2. Terror in the skies

I forgot how much I hate being stuck in ships. Lipton stretched nervously in his seat. The spaceliner _Invigorator_ shuddered slightly as the fuel lines disconnected and dropped away towards Masada. The thought that he would probably never see his home planet for a long time made him feel sick. In his twenty-five years he had never once been offworld, much less in an actual spaceliner. The feeling made him nauseous.

A flight attendant turned on the safety lights and Lipton hurriedly buckled on his belt. The belt rubbed painfully against the callus's on his hands. He winced and fought to remain calm. _Calm down, Lipton. This is perfectly safe. Think of it as a prolonged trip on a commuter._ His gaze wandered subconsciously across the cabin, scanning for potential enemies. It was a dumb thing to do. The chance of a hijacking was slim to nil considering the presence of three UNSC Flight Marshals onboard. Lipton exchanged a few words with them as he boarded. They were tough. He hated to think of what they could do in the narrow confines of a spaceliner.

The flight attendant paused at his row. Lipton looked up and smiled nervously at her. She smiled back coyly. Her eyes flashed a little as she looked him over. Then, with deliberate slowness, she reached across him and flicked off a light. Her arm brushed against his legs and lightly pulled aside his jacket. Her eyes widened as she caught sight of his sidearm tucked safely away in his chest holster.

Lipton shook his head reprovably at her alarm and slipped out his passport. Carefully, so that no one could see, he opened it and showed her the ID marker identifying him as Spec Ops. Her alarmed expression dissolved at the sight and her coy smile reassumed control.

As she leaned back she winked at him and gave him a wide smile. A slip of paper fell out of her hand as she moved on to the next row. Lipton bent over and picked it up with the intention of calling her but paused as he read it. It had her phone number and the room of the hotel she was staying at next stop. He suppressed a grin and tossed the paper into a nearby wastebasket. Women were too loose these days.

The spaceliner jerked slightly as the engines turned on to full gear. Vertigo flooded Lipton as he clutched the arms of his seat. Fear crept into his belly as the g-force pushed him back into his seat. Even with the exorbitant gravitational dampeners a measure of pull dragged throughout the ship. _Here we go._

Gradually the g-force drained away and the ship returned to its normal feel. A gentle hum indicated that the _Invigorator_ had entered Slip-Space. The safety lights flipped off and Lipton undid the straps holding him to his seat. His hands fumbled with the buckle. Looking down, he saw his hands shaking slightly.

Lipton stood and stretched slowly. He headed off towards the latrine as quickly as his feet could carry him. On the way he passed two of the Marshals. The Marshals chuckled as he stumbled slightly when the ship changed course. The best Lipton could do was to muster a sheepish grin and hold onto the handrails to keep his balance.

There was a line for the latrine when he got there. Two men were ahead of him exchanging the latest news about the Galactic Cup, a racing league. Lipton listened in casually as he waited. His eyes constantly swept the area for weapons or hostiles. The Armed Forces were not everybody's favorite and there had been reports of several organized terrorist strikes against UNSC personnel in the past months. Nothing that unusual, but times were changing.

A dozen new inhabitable planets had been discovered and several companies were racing to plant their flags in first. The UNSC had the dreary job of trying to keep the peace. Eventually one of the sides got tired of the politics and launched several sabotage missions that resulted in enormous crack-downs by the UNSC troops. That earned them an infamous reputation.

Two men sidled up to Lipton in line. They glanced around nervously at the other passengers while constantly checking something in their jackets. _Nervous, sunglasses, leather jackets, new Intel Ops or terrorists._ His thoughts were confirmed when he caught a glimpse of a standard-issue MA5B cut down to an SMG size. _Intel_; _Just great._

He finally got his turn and entered the latrine. Now that he had some privacy he couldâ€¦|

A handful of shots rang out in the ship. Instantly Lipton spun around and unholstered his sidearm. The shots had stopped but the proximity of the screams indicated that whatever had happened was not over. Two more shots rang out, much closer this time. He slid on the silencer and aimed at the center of the door as a precaution. His left hand snaked out and reached for the door latch when he guessed that it was safe to leave.

His hand had just reached the latch when the door swung inwards. A blur shot through and collided with him, knocking him backwards. Instincts kicked in and he rolled with the fall. When his back hit the wall he found footing and propelled himself forward. He landed on top with his silenced pistol pressed firmly in the attacker's throat.

It was the flight attendant. Her terrified face was reflected in the metal sink by Lipton's head as her eyes traveled between the silencer and his face. Her breathing was short and shallow as she tried to not move. He slowly and calmly pulled the gun away and pushed off of the ground. She stayed frozen on the floor until he holstered the weapon and held out a placating hand. After staring at the hand for a few seconds she timidly accepted the hand and pushed off the ground.

Lipton put an arm around her shoulder and sat her down on the lidded toilet seat. Once she was out of the way he walked back to the door and found it shut. The magnetic seal had closed the door behind her. With his ear pressed to the door he fought to hear what was going on.

Someone just outside the door was shouting in an unidentified language. From the confused noise around him Lipton guessed someone had been shot. His thoughts were confirmed when he heard Starck, one of the Marshals, call for a doctor. There was a scuffling noise and the terrorist spoke up again. His voice was nervous and loud. Lipton guessed he was high on something.

The flight attendant let out a nervous gasp behind him as he drew his pistol and cocked the hammer. He glanced back and gave her a reassuring smile. This was child's play compared to his usual runs. He just had never had to deal with the specifics of a spaceliner before. There was a first time for everything.

Thankfully the door swung both ways. Lipton planted a foot on the center of the door and booted the door outwards. He followed straight behind, gun raised and scanning for targets. The first man that came into view was using a hostage as a shield against two Air Marshals. A double tap of his 9mm dropped him like a rock. He swung around to his right and a second man came into view. This man was older than the first. He looked like a stereotype terrorist in his dark jacket and with an illegal SMG waving around in his hand, and with explosives belted around the waist. Lipton's first shot blew off the man's thumb before it could reach the detonator in his hand. The next two caught the man in the forehead and sprayed his brains across a view-shield. He tumbled over and landed in a heap by a horrified passenger.

One final terrorist was in view. The man deftly knocked aside Lipton's pistol and head butted Lipton in the face. The force of the blow snapped Lipton's neck back. Without thinking he reversed his grip on the pistol and brought it down hard on him. There was an audible cracking noise as the handle smashed into his jaw. He continued on undaunted however, and thrust a 6" blade into Lipton's gut.

A fiery sensation swept through his body as the man twisted and wiggled the blade looking for vital organs. The pistol came down again, this time breaking his nose and splashing blood in both of their eyes. The man recoiled away and wrenched his knife out of Lipton's gut. He planted a foot on Lipton's crotch and pushed off as hard as he could.

Lipton gasped and bit back a stream of curses. The man back-crabbed away and pulled out a second knife. Before Lipton could rise he dove past Lipton and grasped for the fallen detonator.

A single shot rang out in the cabin. The terrorist fell heavily on top of Lipton, brains pouring out of a giant hole in his forehead. A pair of strong arms lifted the man and tossed him aside. Blinking through the light Lipton made out the face of Starck.

Starck lifted him up in his arms as if he was a doll and motioned for the second Air Marshal. "I'll take this one up to the med center and come back for Thurston. Try to clean this mess out."

The Air Marshal saluted and waved back the curious and scared passengers. Lipton struggled to stay conscious as the pain threatened to overwhelm him.

"What happened?" he asked.

"They dressed up as Intel operatives. As soon as our backs were turned they lit up Thurston and grabbed a couple hostages as shields. We were about to light them up when hotshot number two revealed his C3. Then you came out of the latrine and hell broke loose. I must say, that was an impressive fight you put up. I haven't seen a man in my life that could move that fast. Where'd you learn to do that?"

Lipton grunted as a fresh set of pain stabbed through his gut. "Masada CT. I've been fighting ever since I was thirteen when the Mullahjadi War broke out."

"Whoa." Starck's eyes widened in surprise. "Were you the really in the war? That war made headlines across the galaxy. I was in Basic when news reached Earth."

"Yeah. Some school friends and I escaped the Geno-blitz and spent three years living in the mountains fighting off the Nalhirad. We lived off deer and other wildlife for two years before the UNSC arrived. When they finally did, all but seven of us had died of starvation or from combat; several of us froze to death in those mountains."

Starck glanced down at the floor as they reached the lift. "Oh. You must have been the Rebel Cadre. I am sorry about your friends. I can personally assure you that nearly every Marine involved wished that they could have done more sooner. I was part of the spearhead force in the UNSC suppression force. What the Nalhirad did wasâ€¦| appalling."

"It was." Lipton looked around as they stepped in the lift. "I can walk, by the way. You don't need to carry me. It was just a gut wound."

"Just a gut wound?" Starck scoffed. "You're insides are fighting to escape." The lift door opened and he stepped out into the ship's med bay. A dozen doctors crowded around and placed Lipton onto a crash-cart. As they wheeled it away Starck ventured a final question.

"Hey, I didn't' catch your name. Did you know the Assassin?"

Lipton lifted his head slightly and smiled grimly back at Starck. "George Lipton. I was the Assassin."

Starck was too stunned to reply before Lipton disappeared into the ER room.

3. Facing the Past

So this is Earth. Lipton's breath caught in his throat as the _Invigorator_ left SlipSpace. The world was bright and alive, very much unlike Masada. The atmosphere was so clear that he could see the outlines of the continents from his vantage point in deep space. It was an awe-inspiring sight. Fifteen half-finished Orbital MAC guns drifted in orbit in three unit clusters, guarded by a full squadron of UNSC cruisers and frigates. In between the battle clusters flowed a never-ending stream of ships and transports like the

Invigorator.

The safety lights flicked on as the _Invigorator_ closed in on an orbital entry point. Lipton smiled grimly as he thought about the hijackers. _The Marshals claimed that they were political terrorists. They were too well armed for that. Only a high-grade terror organization could afford weapons like those. We must have had a high-profile target on the flight._ _I hate it when the Intel freaks pull this crap out of the bucket._

Starck had visited him in the medbay several times since the hijacking attempt. His visits were always accompanied by gifts or heartfelt thank-you's from the passengers. The attention made Lipton uncomfortable. He was used to the unrecognized and unheralded gory glory of the CT Masada. This sudden turn of events unnerved him.

He replayed the hijacking attempt in his mind when he was alone. It was second-nature to him by now after an action. He relied on his clear memory for much, especially since he was being excluded from the follow-up forensics duty that he normally participated in. By now he could list every article of clothing that the terrorists were wearing, what weapons they used, which was the leader, how they had reacted and which men had been married. Only one was married. He had a clear platinum band around his fourth finger left-side with a woman's name inscribed on it. Lipton had heard about that rising fashion, putting the spouse's name on the ring. Not only did it give the wearer a constant reminder of who they shared their lives with, it also saved insurance companies an immeasurable amount of money with recovery operations.

As Lipton replayed his movements in the brief action he noticed something that he had over-looked earlier. One of the men had a red seal tattooed onto his left bicep. The image was faint in Lipton's mind, but instinct told him that it was indeed a Spec Ops tattoo. _An operator had gone bad? That doesn't bode well for whoever is hunting him or her._

The door slid open behind him. From the weight of the steps Lipton guessed it was Starck. Turning his head, he saw that he was right. Starck entered the room slowly and deliberately, accompanied by an older man wearing a suit and tie. Something about the man told Lipton that he was important and worthy of respect. Lipton tried to rise to greet the man, but his stomach spasmed and he fell back on the bed, one hand clutching his waist, one holding a corner of the bed.

Starck stood to the side and allowed the man to approach Lipton. He was a slim man of about sixty, wiry in build and kindly in appearance. White hair covered his head in a close crop that concealed a wrinkled and troubled countenance. With a sigh the man extended his hand and smiled.

"So, you are the man that saved the ship. It is an honor to meet you. My name is Gene Grenfield."

Lipton accepted his hand. His grip was deceptively strong and steady for one of his years. "It was nothing, sir. Marshal Starck actually stopped them from detonating their bomb. I just caused a ruckus." He frowned and blinked solemnly. "I missed your name, sir. Could you repeat it?"

"Gene Grenfield, Sol system ambassador to the ACPC."

Lipton's mouth formed a silent 'O' and he froze. This man was the president of the Allied Colonies Political Council. A man of his stature and influence could change the galaxy on a whim.

"It is a pleasure, sir."

"On the contrary, I find it a great honor to be in the presence of a man that will throw down his life for mankind. The same cannot be said of many, especially my fellow politicians."

His frank honesty caused Lipton to crack a smile. "I was just doing my duty, sir."

"I know, which is why I came to see you." His pleasant demeanor melted and a firm, resolved look replaced it. "I contacted High Command to report this unpleasant affair. They told me that you are a candidate for the Orbital Drop Shock Trooper Corps. I have been keeping an eye on the commander and—" he started as if noticing Starck for the first time. With unspoken consent the Air Marshal saluted and left the room. When the door shut Grenfield turned back to Lipton. "The commander is a little too ambitious. He is constantly trying to one-up his fledgling program and will do anything to keep it from sinking. He is not above murdering his troops."

Lipton raised an eyebrow. He had heard about fanatics in the UNSC, but none that were crazy enough to execute soldiers. Such a thing had never been done since the World Wars back in the late 20th century.

"Anyway." Grenfield patted him on the shoulder and rose stiffly. His cheery countenance returned he looked for all the world like a content man. "Good luck with the program. I'll be watching you."

Lipton's curiosity got the better of him as Gene Grenfield reached the door. "Sir, is it true that you once served in the Terra Division Special Ops?"

Gene paused at the door. Lipton winced as he felt a sharp retort coming and cursed his curiosity. "I once was, yes." A childish gleam flickered in Gene's eyes as he turned his head to see Lipton. "Why do you want to know?"

"Well, sir." Lipton stumbled over his words as he sought the best choice of words. "I, uh, well—um, the Terra Spec Ops were on Masada as part of Operation Restoring Order. Were you, um, part of the force then?"

Gene's answer was long in coming. He mulled over the question for a minute. Finally recognition dawned on his face. "Yes, I was there. It was my second-to-last mission. I was a colonel then." His expression was bleak and cold as he thought about it. "The Nalhirad deserved to be punished for what they did. I am still haunted by the images that I saw there, in the main square of Nazareth." His voice choked and for a brief second Lipton saw tears creeping at the edge of his eyes. "They had butchered hundreds of civilians as we came in. There was nothing we could do for the survivors except to put them out of

their misery. That was not all of it though.

"I still remember the awful scene at the Nalhirad command post. Thirty mutilated Nalhirad soldiers were splayed out across the two story building, ripped to bloody pieces and bleeding rivers. In the basement, where they kept prisoners, was a lone boy, wounded in dozens of places, clutching to his chest a tortured and murdered girl. He was unconscious from blood loss, but he was still crying and whispering her name. 'Natalie,' he whispered; over and over, without a pause. It took three of us to pry his body away and get him to a hospital. Intel found uncorrupted video feed from the building. The boy had slain all of the Nalhirad by himself. Nothing that they did could stop him as he mowed them down despite a dozen wounds and being outnumbered and outgunned. I wish I knew what happened to him."

"Sir, I can tell you what happened to him." Lipton blinked back his own tears. "I am that boy. I was in a coma for two months after the war. When I finally came to, everything had changed. People did not speak of the war; they refused to admit its existence. Barely a single trace of the conflict remained on our world. My friends and I were forgotten by all but those whose families were still alive.

"I stormed the command post to rescue my friend's body. The Nalhirad had captured her a week before the UNSC forces arrived. Just to spite me they had her raped and tortured, and then they broadcasted it all across the continent. Their leader Ezeri-Khyelmahn, challenged me during the broadcast, taunting me for being unable to stop what was happening. To tell you the truth, I lost it. Five, maybe six of my buddies were still alive out of thirty some. Two were her siblings. I could not let them get away with their crime.

"So I stole away from the camp that night. I attacked them at dawn in the middle of Nazareth, right in front of their whole 3rd Army. I was so angry I could not feel the pain as the bullets tore through my body. I killed everyone in my way until I found Ezeri-Khyelmahn." Lipton's voice broke and he let the tears that had been kept sealed for years flow. "You saw what I did to him."

Gene frowned and stared at the floor. "I heard about the broadcast." He said quietly. "Intel made sure every soldier in the battle group heard what they were doing to the people on Masada. I have never seen more passionate and furious men in my life. But your story cannot be matched. I do not know what that pain must have been like, nor can I imagine it. However, I can tell you this." He looked up and forced himself to gaze into Lipton's eyes. "If you ever need help or aid, let me know. Nearly any soldier that participated in the Masada action would gladly lend a hand and wish that they could have been beside you fighting the Nalhirad. Do not bear hard feelings towards them, for they all wanted to respond much faster than they could."

"I know." Lipton's voice was a mere whisper through his tear-stained lips. "I am thankful that they came at all."

Gene Grenfield gave him a firm salute and left the room. Something inside Lipton felt better than before, as if his heart had been torn open and all the pain had drained away. Through the pain and sorrow he saw a glimmer of hope and peace that had never been there to comfort him before.

Starck entered the room silently and waited for Lipton to notice him. Lipton brushed away his tears and pulled together a half-hearted grin. "He is a great man," he said, pointing out the door way at Gene Grenfield's retreating back. "I hope for the galaxy's sake that fortune smiles on him for his life."

Starck nodded in agreement and rubbed his hands together. "The feeling is mutual. Gene Grenfield is one of the most amazing men I have ever met."

"He is."

End
file.